

Keeping faith: The use of religion and spirituality by African Americans living with a life-limiting illness

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Objective The purpose of this study was to delineate a conceptual framework to synthesize the experience of African Americans living with a life-limiting illness at home.

Method

A qualitative, grounded theory approach was used in this study. 13 African Americans older than 50 years of age who lived in rural north central Florida and were diagnosed with a life-limiting illness participated in 28 audiotaped interviews. The transcripts from the interviews, data from a clinical chart review and the researcher's field notes were analyzed. Additionally, case studies were developed from the data to provide a context to illustrate and synthesize the experiences of the participants.

Findings: Data analysis led to the discovery of the basic social psychological process of "Keeping Faith." The process of "keeping faith" is composed of three major concepts: connecting with family and community, connecting with God and connecting with Self. Connecting (being in relationship) unified the concepts because it is through the connections to objects in the social world that the participants in the study defined themselves, found comfort and created meaning while living with a life-limiting illness. Religion and spirituality provided the foundation for the strategies used to cope with aspects of living with a life-limiting illness such as determining life-expectancy, maintaining spiritual well-being and struggling to create a new relationship with a changing body. Participants reinterpreted the prognosis conversation with the physician in the language of religion and spirituality. Reliance on God's Omniscience placed determination of the time of death in the hands of a trusted, benevolent God/Supreme being and affirmed a relationship with God. The participants attributed meaning to the cause of the illness and the purpose of their suffering in relationship with God and through the use of religious metaphors and characters. Comfort manifested in diverse ways such as relief of physical symptoms, a feeling of safety, a sense of control, release of tension, hope and spiritual renewal.

Discussion: African Americans living with a life-limiting illness use strategies that are derived from religion and spirituality to affirm life and provide comfort. Comfort encompasses more than symptom management and the power of palliative care lies in the work of an interdisciplinary team. This study demonstrates that religion and spirituality are integrated in the lives of African Americans living with a life-limiting illness and underscores the need for the clinical staff to collaborate with a spiritual care provider to interpret the language and symbols from religion and spirituality so that all clinicians are able to provide support and guidance to the patient and family.

